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TAGS: [OREP](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [MASS](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR THE VISIT OF CODEL LYNCH TO TUNISIA

REF: STATE 97918

Sensitive but Unclassified. Please handle accordingly.

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Congressman Lynch, the U.S. Embassy in Tunis warmly welcomes you and your delegation's visit to Tunisia September 27-28, 2009. Tunisia is a stable and moderate country with a record of economic and social progress. The Tunisian government delivers relatively high quality education, healthcare, housing, infrastructure, and security to its population. Tunisia has a diversified economy and enjoys one of the highest standards of living on the continent. Tunisia is a model for the region on women's rights. Politically, however, the country is dominated by a single party, the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD). Political freedoms are tightly controlled and Tunisia's human rights practices are a source of concern. Regional and domestic extremists are active in the area. In your meeting with Minister of Defense Kamel Morjane (requested but not confirmed), he will likely emphasize a long history of U.S.-Tunisia cooperation on security and regional stability. Logistical information for your visit is provided in paragraphs 14-18. End summary.

Bilateral Relationship

¶2. (SBU) Your visit takes place in the context of long-standing and generally positive bilateral relations. The United States was the first Western power to recognize an independent Tunisia in 1956 and we have provided over \$6 billion in assistance over the years. Tunisia has had several high level visits recently: Congressman Gregory Meeks and a delegation visited here in August, Congressman Adam Schiff visited in July, and Special Envoy George Mitchell visited in April.

¶3. (SBU) USG assistance to Tunisia consists primarily of military assistance (see paragraph 8) and starting in FY 2008 and 2009, about \$2 million in economic support funds (ESF). The Embassy is developing projects to use ESF primarily in the areas of rule of law, good governance, civic participation, and economic growth. In the wake of President Obama's Cairo speech, which was well received in Tunisia, the Embassy is pursuing opportunities to deepen our cooperation with the Tunisian government and Tunisian institutions. One area where the Tunisians have expressed interest in stepping up collaboration is science and technology.

Political Overview

¶4. (SBU) Tunisia is a constitutional republic with a population of just over 10 million. Politics are dominated by a single political party, the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD). Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali has been President since 1987, when he replaced President Bourguiba. Although the Government of Tunisia has many of the institutions of democracy, it is not a democracy. The RCD maintains an effective lock on three-quarters of the seats in parliament and is also omnipresent in positions of authority at the provincial and local levels. Political liberties are tightly restricted and civil society activities are closely monitored and limited.

¶5. (SBU) Government officials say they intend to pursue political liberalization, but at a pace appropriate to Tunisia's level of development. They underscore their belief that Islamists pose a serious threat to the country's record of secular and moderate policies. Tunisia's slow progress on political reform has been a concern for the U.S. government in recent years. Although President Ben Ali has introduced some reforms in the past two years (e.g., pardoning some political prisoners), civil society and human rights groups continue to report many instances of government harassment, intimidation, and limits on their activities. Local media often lacks meaningful coverage of domestic political issues. In the 2008 Reporters without Borders index, Tunisia was ranked 143 out of 173 countries.

¶6. (SBU) President Ben Ali is seeking a fifth five-year term in elections that will be held on October 25. Although three candidates are nominally running against him, the race is not structured to be competitive. Ben Ali took, according to official results, 94 percent of the vote in 2004.

Security and Terrorism

¶7. (SBU) Ben Ali and other Tunisian leaders often contrast their successes in keeping Tunisia stable with problems elsewhere in the region. While Tunisians grumble privately about corruption and restricted liberties, there is abiding appreciation for Ben Ali's success in steering the country clear of the instability and violence that have plagued Tunisia's neighbors. However, the threat of terrorism exists, particularly in light of the 2007 establishment of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). In February 2008, AQIM kidnapped two Austrian tourists travelling in the desert along the Tunisian-Algerian border and only released them in October. Tunisian security forces dismantled a terror cell in December 2006-January 2007. The U.S. Embassy and U.S. personnel in Tunis were reportedly among the group's intended targets. In 2002, a faction of Al-Qaida claimed responsibility for an attack on the Ghriba synagogue on the southern island of Djerba. This attack, in which 20 victims were killed, was the first Al-Qaida related terrorist attack after September 11, 2001.

¶8. (SBU) The Government of Tunisia (GOT) remains concerned about signs of increasing Islamic extremism and national security is a major priority. It places a high value on its historic and robust military-to-military relationship with the United States. In FY 2008, our military assistance was the highest it has been in recent years, at approximately \$25 million. Our aid included \$8.35 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF), \$9.98 million in Section 1206 funding for counter terrorism equipment, \$4.1 million in assistance under peacekeeping operations, and \$1.7 million in International Military Education (IMET). FMF funding for FY 2009 is set at \$12 million. The Tunisian military tends to view FMF levels as a gauge of the health of our bilateral relations.

¶9. (SBU) Helpfully, Tunisia is an active participant in United Nations peacekeeping missions, including in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. The GOT takes part in NATO seminars and activities, and we have planned several annual military exercises with Tunisia.

Regional Issues

¶10. (SBU) Tunisia has been supportive of U.S. efforts on Israeli-Palestinian peace, is like-minded on Iran, and has an Embassy in Baghdad. However, Tunisia rarely leads and usually follows the Arab League consensus on international and regional issues. Given its moderate track record, we continue to encourage the Government of Tunisia to do more to promote regional peace and security. Political and economic integration with Tunisia's Maghreb neighbors has been elusive, although Tunisia's relations with Libya and Algeria are stable.

Socio-Economic Context

¶11. (SBU) Tunisia styles itself as "a country that works." Despite Tunisia's relatively small economy and lack of natural resources, the Tunisian government provides relatively high quality education, health care, housing, infrastructure, and security to its population. Tunisian women enjoy more rights and opportunities than in any other Arab country. The 1956 Personal Status Code abolished polygamy and required consent for marriage, among other protections. Women today play an important role in the public and private sectors. The GOT has also put a strong emphasis on the importance of education, and the literacy rate is comparatively high at 74 percent.

¶12. (SBU) Since independence, there has also been real economic progress. Tunisia has the most diversified economy in the region and enjoys one of the highest standards of living on the continent. The country does not have large reserves of hydrocarbons like its neighbors Algeria and Libya, but has prospered under the long-standing government policies to diversify the economy by developing manufacturing industries for export. The United States is Tunisia's eighth largest import supplier.

¶13. (SBU) The Government of Tunisia also seeks to attract foreign direct investment and strengthen its agriculture sector. Thanks to these policies, Tunisia's economy has maintained average annual GDP growth rates of five percent over the past decade. Due to the recent international economic crisis, however, growth has been revised downward to less than three percent for 2009. At the same time, social programs have limited population growth. GDP per capita in 2008 was approximately \$4,022 (GDP per capita using purchasing power parity was \$8,020). The United States and Tunisia signed a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) in 2002 to strengthen bilateral economic engagement. The third TIFA Council meeting took place in Tunis in March 2008, but there has been little follow up by the Tunisians.

Logistics

¶14. (U) Political/Economic Counselor Ian McCary will be the control officer for your visit. Contact information for Mr. McCary follows: telephone 216-71-107-252 (office), 216-20-270-700 (mobile), 216-71-107-000 (Embassy switchboard), 216-71-107-212 (24 hour Embassy Marine Post 1); fax 216-71-107-212; email: mccaryij@state.gov (official), ianmccary@mac.com (private).

¶15. (U) Control Officer will meet and assist the delegation at the airport with Embassy vehicles and expediter.

¶16. (U) Reservations have been made for Congressman Lynch and delegation at the Ramada Hotel, Gammarth (Tunis), within per diem. The Ramada Hotel telephone number is 216-71-911-100; fax 216-71-910-041.

¶17. (U) Currency exchange: The Embassy will provide travelers with per diem in local currency upon arrival and reverse currency exchange prior to departure. The current approximate exchange rate is 1.28 Tunisian Dinars to the U.S.

dollar.

¶18. (U) Security/Crime Information: Tunisia is a moderate Arab country that has traditionally enjoyed peace and stability. However, in light of the September 11, 2001 attacks and ongoing violence in the region, the American Embassy reminds visitors to maintain a high level of vigilance and to take appropriate steps to increase their security awareness. While the Government of Tunisia has and will continue to make efforts to protect foreigners, visitors should avoid large crowds and crowded public areas. Tunisian security forces are omnipresent and generally ensure public order. Low level, non-violent property crimes are relatively common. Pickpockets and purse snatchers are common in areas with high volume tourist traffic such as the Tunis Medina (old city) and central market. It is prudent to exercise normal travel security precautions and maintain a low profile as one would in any major U.S. city.

GRAY